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ABSTRACT

A representative six-year foreign language curriculum (grades 7-12) is analyzed and noted to be based on several underlying principles. Difficulties which arise from rigid adherence to certain methodological principles are discussed, particularly those concerning the relationship between audiolingual and writing skills. Suggestions on ways to improve teaching through a reexamination of the curricular microstructure are made. (RL)

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The Macro and Micro Structure of the Foreign Language Curriculum

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AT PRESENT the majority of experts seems to be in agreement on the general nature and content of the Foreign Language Curriculum in the secondary school. Thus while the following description and discussion of the Foreign Language Curriculum is based on the bulletin *French for Secondary Schools* (Bureau of Secondary Curriculum Development, New York State Education Department), other state bulletins or documents[1] could have been used without coming to significantly different conclusions.

The following quotations are then taken from the New York State Bulletin description, or rather summary, of the six year foreign language sequence from grade 7 through 12 (pp. 163–172). There the activities to be conducted in each grade are summarized by skills or phases: 1. the audio-lingual, 2. reading, 3. writing.

1. *Audio-lingual phase:* In grade 7 the audio-lingual activities include above all a "prereading period, without the use of printed materials," "dialogues, conversational sequences, and pattern drills." Grade 8 continues the same kind of audio-lingual activity. The main innovation of grade 9 seems to be that "integration with text materials is recommended. Directed dialogues from English equivalencies is practiced and the reading material is used audio-lingually." By grade 10 we arrive at the stage when "audio-lingual activity is integrated with reading. Oral reporting is correlated with reading material whenever possible. Discussion in simple language ensues." In grade 11 "audio-lingual activity is integrated with reading. Oral reports are made," and there are also "brief reports in simple French on salient features of the civilization." Grade 12 is essentially a continuation of this kind of activity with "oral reports on cultural topics."

2. *Reading phase:* In grade 7 "reading begins with identical speech patterns learned audio-lingually and progresses to recombinations of these familiar patterns." "Toward the end of grade 8 material not previously experienced in class may be read." Grade 9 follows with more difficult reading and the assignment of both extensive and intensive reading. Grade 10 introduces "longer selections of literary value," "reading of simple, authentic materials" and "supplementary reading." In grade 11 "extensive reading expands" and "may be used for oral reports." In grade 12 all intensive reading is definitely "supplemented by a well-organized extensive reading program."

3. *Writing phase:* In grade 7 "writing consists primarily of copying words and expressions in speech patterns, sentences and dialogues learned audio-lingually." But there is also "guided writing of drill patterns learned audio-lingually and experienced visually." In grade 8 "pupils begin to write answers to dialogue questions." In grade 9 writing expands to "answers to questions in which the structural changes involved are patterned on the question" and includes the beginning of "directed composition." ("Directed composition" involves for instance a set of questions the answers to which "structure" a composition for the student.) Grade 10 introduces "controlled composition" (e.g. summarizing of passages in the pupils' own words, writing a letter for which the teacher provides the guide lines). The program of directed and guided composition continues into grade 11, which also introduces letter writing. In grade 12 "controls are gradually decreased" and finally "compositions are written on civilization topics, including area information, history and literature."

The above summary includes, of course, only some of the highlights of the very thorough and thoughtful description of the curriculum found

[1] E.g., *French, Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing*, Bulletin of the California State Department of Education, Vol. XXXI, No. 4 (October, 1962); or *Language Instruction: Perspective and Prospectus*, Bulletin of the California Department of Education, Vol. XXXII, No. 4 (November, 1963).

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in the Bulletin. But even from this summary we can deduce the salient principles which were obviously used in its development. These principles are:

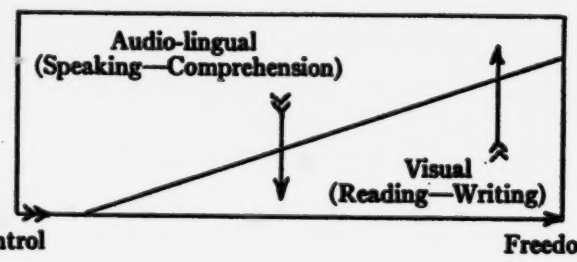
(1) *Visual activity* (reading, writing) *increases throughout the curriculum as audio-lingual activity decreases.* Since the curriculum starts with a completely audio-lingual phase (pre-reading period) one might say that the reading /writing segment starts with zero. In the final stages of the curriculum it takes up some 80% of the total activity.

(2) *In the intial stages* (grades 7 and 8) *the flow of activity and material is always from the audio-lingual to the reading.* (Only material first learned audio-lingually can be read.) *Later the direction may be reversed:* reading can serve as the *basis* of audio-lingual activity.

(3) *In all activities there is a gradual lessening of control throughout the curriculum.* This progression from control to freedom is particularly well dramatized by the comparison of the initial and final stages:

Audio-lingual: Repetition, pattern practice—Oral reports, conversation
Reading: Reading of patterns learned audio-lingually—free supplementary reading
Writing: Copying words and patterns—Free composition

We might thus use the following diagram to summarize and symbolize the salient features of the curriculum:



From my own observations of many high school classes and from discussions with teachers and pupils alike, I have come to the conclusion that the problems inherent in the structure of the above curriculum seem to lie in its early phases. They seem to be connected with all three of its major aspects: the primary and initial exclusiveness of the audio-lingual phase, the insistence on audio-lingual mastery before reading, and the rigidity of controls.

The reason for the emphasis on the audio-lingual phase and for withholding the written word in the initial stages of instruction is, of course, the necessity of developing auditory comprehension and accuracy of pronunciation. The student who "reads" the foreign language is apt to reproduce the symbol/sound relationships which he has learned from his native language. Reading before speaking may lead to perpetuating his native accent in the foreign language and to "spelling pronunciations." At the same time, however, there is little doubt that having visual symbols available which parallel the spoken words to be learned is also a help in the learning process. Thus the written word is in the strange and paradoxical position of being a help and a hindrance at the same time. The language teacher has to learn to judge the exact moment at which it ceases to be interference or hindrance and becomes a help—or at least more of a help than a hindrance. In most situations this moment arises when the student has learned to pronounce a given "assignment" (phrase, paragraph, conversation, pattern drill) correctly—but needs the help of the written word in attempting to commit the assignment to memory. In other words, we must fortify the student against mispronunciation and spelling pronunciation—we must create the habit of the correct pronunciation—and then introduce the written word at the moment at which we feel that the student will no longer lose his correct habits as a result of interference from the written symbol.

It seems to me that the above stated principle rather than the actual length of the pre-reading period is the relevant factor in avoiding interference from the printed page. The principle of creating audio-lingual fluency before introducing the written word could be applied to two months' work, or a week's assignment, of a single lesson, or one sentence. The only important factor to be kept in mind is that we might lose the advantages of using the written word if the purely audio-lingual period is prolonged excessively. The recommendation that we use a pre-reading period could thus be reworded or modified in the sense that in the early stages of instruction *any* particular unit or assignment start with a pre-reading period in which accurate pronunciation and auditory comprehension is achieved.

Once oral mastery of a given unit—let us say

a dialogue or a pattern exercise—has been achieved, the written word is introduced and the association of sound with symbol can be established. Learning the sound/symbol relationship has several advantages: not only will the availability of the written symbol serve as a memotechnic aid, it will above all enable the pupil to review, learn and memorize as part of his homework assignment—without the help of tape, record, or laboratory, if these latter are unavailable. In other words, the flow from the audio-lingual phase to the visual can then be reversed. The pupil can look at the visual symbols, write them as part of his assignment, and in turn practice pronunciation and hearing as he reads and writes his assignments. Of course, if homework assignments, including-reading and writing, are introduced before the pupil has learned to master the unit in question audio-lingually, all kinds of errors will result. But the point to be emphasized again and again in connection with the audio-lingual approach is that *the advantages do not automatically result from withholding the visual representation of language, but from learning the audio-lingual aspect of any language experience before introducing its visual components.*[2]

The problems associated with the necessity of rigid control in the early stages of the curriculum can be attacked from various points of view. One, undoubtedly, concerns the motivation of the student. Whatever intrinsic motivation the study of the foreign language may offer to the student, it certainly consists primarily in his wanting to achieve the ability to read what he likes to read, and perhaps even more important, to express himself. At the same time, the nature of the curriculum demands that for a long time (two years?) he read only what he has learned to say or what has been prepared or predigested for him, and that he express only what the teacher tells him to express, that he say only what he has learned to say. The real problem, then, is to keep the student motivated in terms of an ultimate but initially at least rather distant goal. To do this more is needed than to hold out the promise of a reward to be earned in the distant future—and two or three years do seem far more distant to the adolescent than they do to the adult. The idea of progress and its motivating force must therefore not only be built into the curriculum, but must be part of its individual components. It must be part of each unit, each lesson, each drill.

I have observed for some time that good teachers will attack a grammatical problem—let us say a pattern drill—by starting with asking the student to repeat the pattern. Then they will proceed to substitution exercises, then to transformations. Finally they will ask the student to use the pattern independently in some sort of context that will involve the student personally, that will apply the pattern to be learned to his own experience, his own personality.[3] This progress from repetition to use in a context concerning the pupil himself implies a relaxation in the amount of control. It gives the pupil the opportunity to learn the new material in association with a variety of contexts and stimuli. It teaches him how to use the materials that he is learning for the purpose of self-expression. Such relaxation of control introduces, of course, some possibility of error on the part of the student—but even this possibility of error (if limited and properly controlled by the teacher) may be beneficial.[4] At any rate, the relaxation of control, the possibility of limited and in itself controlled self-expression, keeps alive the student's motiva-

[2] I find myself thus in substantial agreement with the recommendations made by Wilga M. Rivers, *The Psychologist and the Foreign-Language Teacher*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 160. Dr. Rivers also advocates that the graphic symbol be made available earlier in instruction, and that "to reduce the amount of interference, the teacher should never allow students in the early stages to attempt to read material which they have not already heard pronounced orally, or which they are not simultaneously hearing as they read it silently." I have only some question about the second part of the recommendation, namely the simultaneity of hearing and reading in the initial attack on new material. I know that with some individuals at least the sound/symbol relationship of the native language can become dominant over what they hear. In other words, the teacher says *change* (ʃāʒ) and the pupil, with the printed page in front of him "repeats" *change* (tʃeinʤ).

[3] This same observation is made by the authors of the study *Good Teaching Practices: A Survey of High-School Foreign Language Classes*, Modern Language Association of America, 1961, p. 225. (Reprinted from *Reports of Surveys and Studies in the Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages*).

[4] See Wilga M. Rivers, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–78.

tion and teaches him at the same time how to make the expressions and patterns of the lesson part of his active knowledge, how to transfer them from the contexts in which he has learned them to contexts in which they may be of use to him.

Thus even in the earlier stages of the curriculum, the skill of the language teacher does not lie in withholding the printed word, but in knowing when to introduce it. It does not lie in not allowing the student to proceed from visual symbol to audio-lingual activity, but in timing the reversal of the audio-lingual visual sequence for the most opportune moment. It does not lie in exercising absolutely rigid control and in insisting on repetition and more and more repetition, but in allowing freedom within a framework of control. The central recommendation implied in this article will have become clear to the reader: namely that the essential features which characterize the structure and central philosophy of the Foreign Language Curriculum as a whole should also be the guide for each unit, or perhaps each lesson within the curriculum. A beautiful pearl necklace consists of—beautiful pearls.

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